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SENATE NATURAL RESOURCES

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**Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest Collaborative Proposal
For the Joint Committee of the Senate and House Natural Resources**

This project represents a new paradigm for how we can manage national forests, and to manage them better for watershed health and fish.

The Beaverhead-Deerlodge N.F. at 3.3 million acres is Montana's largest. It is arguably our most important trout forest, because it includes the headwaters of the Clark Fork, Beaverhead, Madison, Big Hole, Ruby and Red Rock Rivers, as well as Rock Creek. It contains the most important westslope cutthroat populations remaining in the upper Missouri River basin; it provides the water that supports the Big Hole's dwindling grayling, and it includes streams that are reintroduction areas for this rare fish. Moreover, the westside of the forest, especially in Rock Creek, holds important resident and migratory populations of bull trout. All in all though, the native fish are dwindling. The status quo means continuing the downward trend. Merely protecting headwaters, without significant restoration, means a continuing a downward trend. We need reverse this and improve connecting habitat to strengthen and expand native fish populations as well as the watersheds that support some of the state's most important wild fish populations.

The forest is revising its long-term management plan. Last year it completed an environmental impact statement on the plan with a recommended alternative. The alternative was okay. Not great, but it did have good standards for protecting fish and it included concepts that would restore damaged fish habitat, of which the forest has plenty of. The problem with the draft is that a lot of it is vague and it includes no mechanism for funding or otherwise implementing any sort of habitat restoration.

Evolution of an innovative project

In January of 2006, Montana Trout Unlimited was approached by consulting biologists for several independent timber mills to see if MTU wanted to sit down with them and the Montana Wilderness Association as well as the National Wildlife Federation to explore whether we had enough common ground to come up with a collaborative approach for better managing this important forest. We accepted the offer because of the incredible implications to fish this forest represents, and because the other groups were going ahead with the deal, it only made sense to make sure fish were a priority.

After several months of negotiation, much common ground was found and we submitted a plan with an alternative for managing the forest that has never been pitched before.

The primary elements include:

1. The B-D will become a "stewardship" forest, wherein all projects involving logging will emphasize conservation and restoration first. Importantly, all projects will be done using a mechanism called "stewardship contracting." This means you select a large landscape, say, for example, the watershed of a tributary of Rock Creek or Flint Creek; you identify all the things that need doing there, most importantly reclaim unneeded and sediment-bleeding roads, pull culverts that are blocking fish, do weed control, maybe fix a campground and maintain a trail, close routes that have been used illegally by ORVs, riparian fencing on a stream, etc. And you pay for this by selling some timber. But the timber that is cut is only done AFTER specific protective buffers and habitat measures have been lined out for fish and wildlife. No new roads will be constructed, and the post logging landscape will be burned using techniques that mimic a natural fire. All temporary roads used to access the trees will be reclaimed after the project is done.
2. The alternative details forest-wide standards that will significantly reduce existing road densities on the forest, thereby eliminating one of the biggest problems to fish and wildlife. Important roads to important destinations, such as trailheads and important recreation areas would stay. The density of roads per square mile will be reduced significantly after a stewardship landscape is managed with the restoration treatments and logging. Basically, we have agreed to a new paradigm for logging and fish and wildlife protection that is unique in application.
3. The parties to this agreement -- Montana Trout Unlimited, National Wildlife Federation, Montana Wilderness Association, and the mills -- Sun Mountain in Deer Lodge, R-Y in Townsend and Livingston, Roseburg Lumber in Missoula, Pyramid Mtn. Lumber in Seeley Lake and Stone Container in Frenchtown -- have also agreed to press the Forest Service recommend that 570,000 acres of roadless country in 16 areas be designated by Congress as wilderness. The timber/mill guys also agreed to work with us in Congress to get that done, if our plan be adopted. Among the areas included are Quigg Peak and the Sapphire roadless areas in Rock Creek, portion of the West Pioneers roadless area, the roadless country in the East Pioneers, small areas in the Flint Creek and Tobacco Root Range, additions to the Anaconda-Pintler, much of the Snowcrest Range, and other areas. Aside from the Wilderness, we recommend another 800,000-plus acres for administrative allocations that protect roadless values, though some motorized recreation, such as established snowmobiling could occur.

4. We have agreed that 700,000 acres of the forest will be considered "suitable" for stewardship-restoration logging. Under the current plan, about 670,000 acres is "suitable" for timber-first logging. Some critics don't like our 700,000 acre figure, but we're okay with it, because this is not "timber-first" management. It's about using careful, judicious restoration logging to fund restoration that the FS is not funding now, and which it will never get the money for. That's why the stewardship contract approach is key to our proposal.

5. The main item causing heartburn with some conservation groups is this: Approximately 200,000 acres of our "suitable" for stewardship logging are in inventoried roadless areas. However, this does not mean most of this will ever be logged, and our plan is clear that the number one priority for any new logging are landscapes that have already been roaded and cut and which need restoration. The reason we included these acres is because the industry guys felt if the landscape for a stewardship project included some roadless country, and it was at the perimeter of the bulk of the roadless area, and it included some timber that could be cut only after fish and wildlife protective standards were applied, why not get some of the trees, especially if they were within, say, a mile of an existing road and we had a hard-and-fast standard that ensures there would not be a permanent road into the area. Moreover, these trees would generate more revenue to use for needed habitat restoration elsewhere in the stewardship landscape. Basically, in the event a slice of roadless was logged, it could only be done if any roads used to get the timber were minimal in disturbance, obliterated and the area essentially was left roadless again. When you couple this approach with our goal to reduce overall road mileage from the existing condition on the forest, the end product of our plan is to have more country without roads than we started with at the beginning of the planning period, which will be about 15 years.

We don't know what the odds of this paradigm shifting proposal surviving. It clearly represents a new way to look at long term management plans and Montana Trout Unlimited is really pleased to have worked with uncommon allies to create a new path for the Conservation community, the timber industry and the Forest Service. The result is a unique proposal that promises to generate a lot of discussion in Montana and I am proud that Montana Trout Unlimited's name is on this because it does represent such measurable benefits for Trout and the rivers and streams they inhabit, the timber industry, wildlife, wild places and most importantly Montana.

Please contact me if you want more information. Attached is a summary of the general points of agreement. Thanks for taking the time to read this.

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Partnership Proposal (May 1, 2006)

- 716,000 acres as "suitable." **Suitable is stewardship and restoration first.** No new permanent roads (except for relocating harmful existing roads); no re-entry for thinning or other activities for life of stand; Logging occurs in larger landscapes that encompass restoration elements; larger units, less fragmentation with post-project fire prescriptions that ensure less suppression control, ragged edges and unburned islands.
- **All logging done under stewardship** contracting informed by **multi-interest advisory groups.** Mechanism for funding restoration that does not depend on appropriated dollars.
- Industry objective is around 1 percent of suitable – 7K acres across the forest -- treated per year of planning period. Priority is on developed portions of forest that have restoration needs.
- No additional logging on "unsuitable" except possibility in urban interface; maybe aspen regeneration.
- Recommended **573,000 in wilderness** in 16 areas. **Industry has committed to lobby** with us.
- No administrative rule for roadless protection
- **Keep 72 designated key watersheds** with 57 emphasizing fish; 15 emphasizing restoration.
- **INFISH standards forestwide** on all projects.
- Additional management indicator species include **mountain goat and sage grouse**
- Road mileage forestwide will **DECREASE** over life of plan.
- Road density objectives measured at **stewardship landscape scale**, and no more than **1.5 miles per square mile.**
- Motorized versus motorized defaulted to travel planning, but with more direction regarding transportation system and allocations.
- Standard for approved motorized routes is: **open to motorized only if designated.** No corridors for summer motorized; off route only for designated sites.
- Approximately 14 percent of roadless inventory part of suitable allocation, scattered across 3.3 million acres in small slices at edges of larger areas where there is an existing road system. If management inside inventoried area boundary, standard is to use minimum access tool necessary. If road needed, it will be temporary and restored upon completing project. Standard for operating in these areas will be to maintain roadless values.
- Grazing and locatable minerals remain the same as preferred alternative, but restoration funding more available.
- Partnership will work on Congress to appropriate funding for NEPA, stewardship project kick-off, extension of stewardship contract authority and wilderness designation.